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Mary E. Gedney: Large Granite Monument at St. Paul's Recalls Woman of Distinction

An unusually large burial stone at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site memorializes Mary E. Gedney, a woman of distinction. The granite monument also recalls the mother who suffered the tragic loss of two infant daughters and died suddenly in 1910 at age 50, stricken with "the captain of death"

Mary achieved success in a realm where women often excelled in the late 19th century, voluntary service organizations. These accomplishments are recognized through the impressive granite memorial. She also earned distinction in a field where women were less likely to thrive, real estate.

Her operations in real estate followed a pattern of introduction to business or trade through a family connection. At a time before most women attended college or vocational schools, those who succeeded in business were often launched in the occupation by a relative. In Mary's case, it was her father, who served as tax assessor of the Town of Westchester, New York, part of the Bronx today, ten miles north of Manhattan, where Mary Hyde was born March 19, 1860. Formal education in the town's schools concluded at age 14, but a few years later she embarked on a business venture, buying property at tax sales, no doubt tutored in the details of real estate by her father.



Leonard D. Tice, Civil War veteran, businessman and public official, was Mary Gedney's first husband.

Her trade of buying and selling property was greatly expanded by her first husband, Leonard D. Tice of Mt. Vernon, whom she married in 1884. A former captain of a Vermont regiment in the Civil War, Tice settled in Mt. Vernon in the early 1870s, and established a real estate and insurance enterprise. He also developed a respectable public service record as justice of the peace and county coroner. A Democrat and Mason, his circle of friends and associates included prominent families, which would have increased Mary's social and professional network. Upon Tice's death in 1893 from a kidney ailment, Mary assumed control of his real estate concern, and maintained

active offices in Mt. Vernon and the nearby neighborhood of Williamsbridge. A politically astute woman before equal suffrage in New York, Mary held office as a local deputy postmaster under the administration of President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat.

Interestingly, Mary's occupation corresponded with patterns of women's ownership of companies in the Gilded Age. These proprietorships usually delivered services or produced goods related to the home, such as cleaning and cooking, and could account for one-fourth of the private businesses in many New York towns. Residential real estate, Mary's specialization, correlated with a Victorian understanding of women as nurturers and protectors of the home. If women were guardians of the domestic habitat, they could also function as conveyors of those dwellings. This correlation was particularly evident among middle class families for which women often selected the residence. An additional reason for Mary's success was the late 19th and early 20th century expansion of real estate and population in southern Westchester County.

Through the marriage to Tice, Mary bore three daughters. She suffered what must have been an emotionally wrenching experience of attending the funeral of two of her children on the same day, May 6, 1890. One of her girls, Gertrude, had only lived 44 days, while the other daughter Stella E. was four and a half. While no surviving records document the reasons for these tragic losses, leading causes of early childhood death were diphtheria, tuberculosis and pneumonia. Leonard was buried alongside the girls in the family plot at St. Paul's when he passed in 1893. Another daughter lived to maturity.

Mary's substantial mark on the historical stage was established through prominent involvement in voluntary organizations. These women's groups cultivated bonds of friendship among members, and sponsored public campaigns and service projects that revolved around themes of heritage, community, education and patriotism. Most importantly, they were acceptable forums of expression and inclusion for women in the 19th century. A natural leader, with administrative experience that probably exceeded most colleagues, Mary gained election to top positions in these lodges. Her membership included the Patriotic Order of America, Star of Mount Vernon Circle, Companions of the Forest, Degree of Pocahontas and the Order of the Eastern Star, an organization associated with the Masons. Her roles as officers in these groups reflected and enhanced her commercial connections.

Serving as President-General of the United Spanish War Veterans auxiliary was her most prestigious responsibility. Ladies auxiliaries (using the terminology of the day) to male-dominated organizations were widespread in the 19th century. These female units supported or worked in association with the national society. Labor unions, for instance, often enlisted a ladies auxiliary to the trade organization, providing relief and support to the men during strikes.

Mary's involvement with the veterans' camp was based on the service of her nephew Isaac T. Hyde's in the Spanish-American War of 1898. During that conflict, Mary coordinated home front support activities for soldiers in the army. After 1898, veterans of the Spanish War, which included the campaigns in the Philippines, established many

separate units to perpetuate the record of their service. These included a post in Mt. Vernon, of which Mary was selected president of the auxiliary. In 1904, several of these entities merged to establish the United Spanish War Veterans (U.S.W.V.). Mary attended the first national convention of the U.S.W.V. in Milwaukee in 1905. By then she had married a second time, to George H. Gedney, and assumed the name of Mary Gedney. As part of the organizational business at Milwaukee, an auxiliary was created. Already serving as senior vice president of the State auxiliary chapter, Mary was selected as President.

In October 1906, Gedney was re-elected to the Presidential post at the group's second national convention. This gathering in Washington, D.C. marked the pinnacle of Mary's public life, with a leading role at the elaborately staged, well attended convention in the nation's capital, highlighted by a reception at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt. Local pride in her achievement is expressed on the front page coverage of the auxiliary event in the Daily Argus. The Mt. Vernon newspaper reported on her enthusiastic reception at the train station, presentation of floral bouquets, directing the proceedings of the convention, and unanimous re-election as President: "Mount Vernon has reason to be proud of the honor accorded it in Mrs. Gedney's reception and in her re-election." After serving the two terms as President-General, Mary remained a senior officer of the national auxiliary.

Death came suddenly, four years later, on October 23, 1910. Apparently healthy, maintaining her business and lodge commitments, she was felled by pneumonia, cited as "the captain of the men of death," by a leading contemporary physician. Following a trip to New York City, she was stricken and taken immediately to the Mt. Vernon Hospital, "where every attention was given her, but the progress of the disease could not be stayed," reported the local paper. The unexpected death of a leader created a forlorn sense of emptiness in voluntary circles and the need, the Argus reported, "to take action" to fill an enormous void.

The immense granite memorial reflects this legacy. Mary's tenure as the first President of the auxiliary of the U.S.W.V. produced a positive impression with the membership, and many "comrades" attended her funeral. With a military flavor, "taps were blown, thus paying the last tribute of love to one so worthy of our consideration," the national chair of the veterans' group somberly informed the 1911 convention.

SECTION TWO.

MOUNT VERNON WOMAN AGAIN CHOSEN HEAD OF SPANISH WAR AUXILIARIES

Mrs. Mary A. Gedney Honored at Recent Convention in Washington—Received by President Roosevelt

Mrs. Mary A. Gedney, of Mount Vernon, was elected president of the United Spanish War Veterans auxiliary at the annual convention held in the national capital in connection with that of the women at Washington last week. The story of her reception was told in these columns at the time, but it is worth repeating, and in which Mrs. Gedney played a prominent part.

Mrs. Gedney, accompanied by the other team of twelve Mount Vernon women, who were elected to the position of auxiliary officers, arrived in the city on the morning of the convention. They were met at the station by a large number of people, and were taken to the hotel where they were to stay. Mrs. Gedney was the first to be elected president of the auxiliary, and she was elected by a large majority.

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RECEPTION TO THE OFFICERS

Of the Westchester Woman's Club in Mount Vernon Last Wednesday Afternoon

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The lodge had a final gesture of appreciation through a massive, three tiered granite stone, weighing about four tons, and reaching a height of nearly eight feet. Set on a sub-grade base of perhaps six feet, the monument combines all three varieties of granite finishes -- polished, steel and rock ledge. Horse drawn wagons delivered the memorial in separate pieces. Masons assembled the monument at St. Paul's, inserting small lead squares between layers to bond the components. A burial pall was chiseled out over the edges of the largest granite slab; it features the U.S.W.V Auxiliary emblem of a soldier and sailor, with a woman between, represented in polished relief embedded over a wreath and cross. Inscription reads, "Mary E. Gedney 1860-1910 Past President General Erected by the National Auxiliary U.S.W.V.